

Albert Camus' *Les Muets*: Who is Mute?

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Following are abbreviations used for Camus works cited in the text. Complete bibliographic information is given in the bibliography at the end of the text.

AC	Algerian Chronicles
EK1957	Exile and the Kingdom (1957)
EK2007	Exile and the Kingdom (2007)
ER	<i>L'exil et le royaume</i>
FM	The First Man
LCE	Literary and Critical Essays
MS	The Myth of Sisyphus
NB1951-1959	Notebooks 1951-1959
PH	<i>Le premier homme</i>
TV	The Voiceless

Introduction

The focus of this essay, Albert Camus' short story *Les Muets*, is the third of six stories published in France in 1957 under the collective title *L'exil et le royaume* (ER). The English translation of the collection by Justin O'Brien was published under the title *Exile and the Kingdom* the same year (EK1957). Fifty years later *Exile and the Kingdom* appeared in a new translation by Carol Cosman (EK 2007). The titles of the stories are ambiguous; O'Brien's and Cosman's translations differ on four out of the six titles, including *Les Muets*. O'Brien translated "*Les Muets*" as "The Silent Men." That all the significant characters in the story are men suggests to a reader of Camus in English only, such as me, that "The Silent Men" is a justifiable translation. In her "Introduction" Cosman agrees a group of working men in the story are *Les Muets*, yet she translates the title as "The Voiceless." Prominent scholars of Camus provide further variations of the title. In *Camus, a Critical Examination* (1988) David Sprintzen

refers to the story as “The Silent Ones.” In his *A Life worth Living: Albert Camus and the Quest for Meaning* (2013) Robert Zaretsky asserts the title should be understood as “The Mute Ones” while Elizabeth Hawes provides a straightforward “The Mutes” as the English title In her biography *Camus, A Romance* (2009).

The differing translations of the title of *Les Muets* lead to an almost comical confusion. Without explanation Sprintzen gives his own translation of the title as “The Silent Ones” in his text and index, yet he refers the reader to O’Brien’s translation in his bibliography. Although Zaretsky asserts the title should be “The Mute Ones,” he fuels confusion by giving the title as “The Mute” in his index. Meanwhile, in the introduction to a 2013 translation by Arthur Goldhammer of Camus’ *Algerian Chronicles*, Alice Kaplan, chair of the Department of French, Yale University, observes *Les Muets* literally means “The Mutes” but is usually translated as “The Silent Men”(AC, 6). What the discussion above demonstrates, however, is that the title in fact is *not* usually translated as ‘The Silent Men.’” The diversity in the translation of the title, indicative of the ambiguity of the story itself, raises the question: who is mute and what does it tell us about Camus intentions in writing the story?.

Ambiguity gives great literary works their depth and enduring challenge to readers, being most effective when a number of interpretations are plausible. And so *Les Muets* elicits different interpretations from different readers—and translators. However, having two translations of *Les Muets* presents a challenge to the general reader in English: how choose between O’Brien and Cosman? Justin O’Brien (1925-1968), a Professor of French at Columbia University in New York City, met and wrote about Camus when he visited the United States in 1946. O’Brien subsequently translated several Camus novels, short stories, essays, and notebooks. His translation of *Exile and the Kingdom* was unchallenged for fifty years. Cosman

is a professional compiler and translator of major nineteenth and twentieth century French authors. So the credentials of both translators are excellent.

Both O'Brien's and Cosman's translations were published by Vintage Press. Vintage must have had some reason for commissioning a new translation; perhaps a decision reached in recognition a new translator would have the advantage of fifty years of Camus scholarship or would be more attuned to twenty-first century linguistic and cultural sensibilities. Whatever Vintage's reasons for a new translation I use Cosman's translation because I believe she recognizes the complex ambiguity of the story in contrast to what appears to be O'Brien's more literal translation. Their different translation of a critical phrase in the story illustrates the point. In the penultimate line of *Les Muets* Yvars, the main character, says to his wife "Ah, c'est de sa faute!" O'Brien translation "Ah, it's his own fault!" refers to a specific character in the story. Cosman's translation "Ah, that's the trouble!" encourages the reader to seek, as I believe Camus intended, the story's broader implications beyond a labour dispute between a boss and his workers in a small factory in a French colonial city.

So, who really are *les muets* and what is the nature of their muteness? This question takes us back to the roots of the story in Camus' life. Seeking answers begins by first considering substantive elements of the story beginning with its context.

The context

Just as Camus assigned great significance to the body's encounter with the world as a way of knowing, he strove to make his fiction "heavy with things and flesh" (FM, note b, 105). His stories are infused with vivid description and a sense of place, not only for stylistic reasons, but to ground the story in concrete, experienced reality. The opening sentences introduces the

geographical locale of the story: “It was midwinter and yet a radiant day was rising on the already bustling town. At the end of the jetty the sea and the sky mingled in a single burst” (TV, 49). The main character, Yvars, is “cycling heavily along the boulevards closest to the port” (TV, 49). The city is never named but from the information given—a bustling port, a jetty, boulevards, the sea, the radiant sky, the French name of the protagonist—we know the locale is Algiers, Algeria, at a when it was a major French colony. Camus was describing an environment with which he was very familiar. Born in 1913, he went to school and university and worked in Algiers until he left for France in 1939. He loved the city. He wrote: “What one can fall in love with in Algiers is what everybody lives with: the sea, visible from every corner, a certain heaviness of the sunlight, the beauty of the people” (LCE, 80). And “above all, there is the silence of the summer evenings” (LCE, 84).

The specific locale of the drama of the story, a cooperage manufacturing wine casks, is also a familiar environment for Camus’ uncle, Etienne Sintes, was a skilled barrel maker. In his autobiographical novel *The First Man* Camus provides a detailed description of a barrel workshop and the tasks undertaken by the workmen; indeed, as a child Camus may have directly assisted his uncle (FM, 123-127). Therefore, the description of the workshop in *Les Muets* is authentic sounding: it “looked out over the former barrel works, a court enclosed by an old covered exercise yard that had been abandon when the enterprise had grown and was now just a storage space for worn out machinery and old barrels” (TV, 54). The workshop is too large for the few men who work there; despite the worktables, mechanical saws, piles of staves, boxes of tools, the workshop seemed “abandoned” (TV 56). The desolate atmosphere of the workshop reflects the economic context of the story.

This is a business in decline due to global technological change: a diminishing demand for barrels due to the introduction of tanker trucks and ships for the transporting of wine. The workers know if the business fails that having “a fine trade but no work, you were backed into a corner and just had to resign yourself. But resignation wasn’t so easy either” (TV, 52). The owner and the workers are trapped by economic changes over which they have little control. They are enmeshed in a seemingly insoluble contradiction: the owner’s desire to preserve his business by containing costs; the workers’ desire for a living wage. The owner refuses to negotiate an increase in wages. The workers, in anger and against the advice of their union, go on strike. In response, the owner closes the workshops doors. After twenty days without wages and on the advice of the union, the workers return to work without a wage increase. When he and the other workmen get to the workshop the doors are still closed. The foreman finally lets them in: “They were quiet, humiliated by this defeated entrance, furious at their own silence but less and less able to break it the longer it went on” (TV, 55). Who specifically are these men of the story?

The men

The society of Algeria in the first half of the twentieth century did not consist only of a prosperous French colonial land-owner class and oppressed eight million Arab and Berber Muslims, a common perception at the time. Of the just over one million predominately French colonials, eighty percent were workers and small businessmen. The standard of living of the workers was better than that of the Arabs but below workers in metropolitan France. Their minimum wage was below the poorest rates in France and their annual social benefits were less than half (AC, 126). This segment of Algerian society encompasses the workers in *Les Muets*. There are fifteen of them representing the ethnic mix of their class. In addition to Yvars, only

four others are given names: Esposito, Marcou, Valery, and Said. The management of the cooperage is the owner, Lassalle, and the foreman, Ballester.

Yvars, the second longest serving employee in the workshop, is forty years old. The owner recognizes this seniority and the respect it gives Yvars among the other workers. Yvars and his wife Fernande (the only adult female in the story) have a young son. Yvars has an affectionate bond with his wife; when he gets home from work in the evening they each have a glass of anisette together on the terrace of their house facing the sea. Yvars is feeling old: "At forty, you aren't done for, no, but you're preparing for it in advance" (TV, 50). When he was twenty he loved the happy weekends swimming in the sea: "The deep clear water, the strong sun, the girls, the life of the body, in his country there was no other happiness" (TV, 50). But "that happiness passed with youth" (FM, 50). Over the years the need to support a family and "to make ends meet, extra hours at the barrel works on Saturday, on Sunday fixing things for private customers...He had gradually lost the habit of those violent days that were once so satisfying" (TV, 50).

In describing Yvars state of mind Camus again drew upon his experience of Algiers where young men find "a life that matches their beauty. Decline and forgetfulness come later" (LCE, 81). For the young "everything is a refuge and pretext for rejoicing: the bay, the sun, games on the red and white terraces overlooking the sea, the flowers and stadiums, the cool-limbed girls. But for the man who has lost his youth there is nothing to hang on to, no outlet for melancholy" (LCE, 81). In the working class district where he grew up people marry young: "They start work very early, and exhaust the range of human experiences in ten short years. A workingman of thirty has already played all his cards. He waits for the end with his wife and children around him. His delights have been swift and merciless" (LCE, 86). He and his friends

may get away on their one day off a week for a hunting trip, such as the ones Camus went on with his uncle, “happy to have escaped for a day from the workshop, from small overcrowded apartments, sometimes from their wives also, uninhibited and in a mood of amused tolerance that is peculiar to men when they have gotten together among themselves for some brief violent pleasure” (FM, 107).

Esposito, a Spanish name reflecting the ethnic diversity of the city, is a large, passionate man; at one point he almost comes to blows when in a rage he told the owner “that he wasn’t a real man” (TM, 53). Marcou, the union representative of the workers, is a countertenor singer with a charming face. Nonetheless he defiantly refuses to shake hands when the owner makes a conciliatory move towards Marcou. Valery, a young worker characterized as “little” has been at the factory for only a year (TV, 57). When the owner enters the workshop for the first time after the workers’ return, he is uneasy when confronted by the silence of the workers. He approaches Valery asking in a conciliatory move: “So then, son, everything all right?” (TV, 58). Valery, being watched by Esposito, “stuck his nose in his wine cask without answering the boss.” Somewhat dumbfounded the owner attempts to engage Marcou in conversation but is again ignored. “Throughout the workshop only the sound of the hammers and the mechanical saw could be heard. The owner calmly starts out of the workshop dismissively addressing the workers with: “when you’ve gotten over this, let me know through Ballester” (TV, 58).

The barefoot Said, the only Arab in the workshop, does the most menial tasks in support of the work of the skilled workers. At lunch break Yvars notices Said alone on a pile of shavings. He asks Said if he has eaten his lunch. Hearing that Said has already finished his few figs Yvars offers him some of his sandwich. At first Said refuses but then eats it “like a man who wasn’t hungry” (TV, 60). Esposito passes around a jar of coffee among the workers; “Said

swallowed it with more pleasure than he'd shown eating" (TV, 61). While the sharing of food and drink with Said is a sign, if not of solidarity, of at least some level of recognition that both the workers and Said are among the lower classes. Nonetheless, Said represents the subordinate and unknown world of the Arabs.

The managers

Ballesteris the oldest employee and foreman. The managerial link between the owner and the workmen, he is of an older generation; broad, short, barefoot, sunburned, sad mouth, drooping mustache. While sympathetic to the workers, he did not approve of the strike foreseeing its bitter consequences. As he assigns the day's work to the returning men he is met with silence by the workers who now associate him more closely with the owner. He in turn kept his own silence when Esposito told him he was "pandering to the boss's interests" (TV, 55).

Finally there is Lassalle, the owner and boss of the business. In Yvars eyes Lassalle "wasn't a bad sort really. He had taken over from his father, had grown up in the workshop, and had known almost all the workers for thirty years" (52). He sometimes shared wine and grilled sardines prepared in the workshop. He gave each worker five bottles of wine for New Year and gifts if there was a wedding or illness in one of their families. He had invited Yvars several times to his property to hunt. "He certainly cared for his workers, and he often recalled that his father had begun as an apprentice" (TV, 52-53). While he did the things expected from a benevolent, small business owner "he had never gone to their homes, he did not understand" (TV, 53). There is an unbridgeable gap between Lassalle and the men, a gap exacerbated by the strike. In the initial negotiations with the workers Lassalle "had said, in effect, quite drily, that it was take it or leave it" (TV, 52). When he made it clear he would not negotiate over wages,

Esposito expressed the anger of the workers: “What does he think! That we’re going kiss his feet” (TV, 52).

Lassalle makes one more attempt at reconciliation with the workers. He calls Marcou, as the union delegate, and Yvars, as the oldest employee after Ballester, into his office. Lassalle reaffirms he is unable to raise wages but he tells them that if business improves he will do what he can about the wages. In the meantime he asks “Let’s work together in peace” (TV, 59). When he asks if his proposal is acceptable neither Marcou nor Yvars respond. Lassalle accuses them of being stubborn but expects that will pass. He tells them in the meantime they should remember his offer. He offers to shake hand with Marcou who turns and leaves the office as does Yvars. As they leave Lassalle cries out: “You can go to Hell!” (TV, 60). When the workers ask Marcou what the boss said, he answers “Hot air” and returns to his work (TV, 60). When they ask how Marcou and Yvars responded Yvars informs them they said nothing. If there was any bond between the owner and the workers, it no longer exists, other than the bond of silence.

A personal turn

To this point of the story the breach is been between Lassalle as owner and the men as workers but their relationship takes a more personal turn when later in the day they all confront a human crisis involving Lassalle’s young daughter. She has an attack of hemiplegia, the paralysis of one side of the body (see NB1951-1954, 43). Ballester lets Yvars know as he rushes out to get the doctor. When Yvars tells the workers what happened “they stood around him and looked at each other, embarrassed” (TV, 62). The men return to work but soon they hear the arrival and then departure of the ambulance. Ballester returns to tell them the child had suddenly fallen

while getting dressed. The workers “were all there, in the silent workshop, under the waves of yellow light dispersed by the glass walls, with their rough, useless hands hanging down by their old trousers covered with sawdust” (TV, 63).

As the day drags on Yvars “would have liked to talk. But had nothing to say, nor did the others” (TV, 63). Their faces expressed “sorrow and a kind of obstinacy” (TV, 63). Indeed, Yvars is deeply conscious for a moment of the misfortune of life but the feeling “disappeared like a bubble blown and burst at the same time” (TV, 63). Yvars “felt nothing but his fatigue and his aching heart” (TV, 63). Earlier the workers went on strike driven by pure emotion, without reflecting upon the consequences of their action. Camus warns that while there “are facts the heart can feel; yet they call for careful study before they become clear to the intellect” (MS, 3). Yvars brief heart-felt bubble of empathy for Lassalle bursts before he is able to clarify its meaning. Consequently his moment of empathy does not lead to action based on reflection, other than he is only eager to go home to the comfort of his family by the sea.

As the men are showering and dressing in the cloakroom before leaving work Lassalle enters the workshop, turning to them in the cloakroom. The men are silent, avoiding his look. Lassalle says a muffled “good night” and heads for the door. At that moment, “when Yvars thought they should have called to him, the door was already closing” (TV, 64). Yvars hurries home. Sitting on the terrace with their glasses of anisette, he tells Fernande everything, “holding her hand as they had done early in their marriage” (TV, 65). When done, he turns to the sea: “‘Ah, that’s the trouble!’ he said.’ He would have liked to be young again, and Fernande too, and they would have gone away, across the sea” (TV, 65). As is typical of Camus’ stories, the ending is abrupt and ambiguous.

What is the trouble Yvars glimpses but cannot articulate and what does it tell us about who is mute? To answer these questions we need to understand the import of silence and poverty in Camus' life growing up in Algiers.

Silence

Silence is something Camus encountered at an early age. For his mother "all was darkness since that childhood illness had left her deaf and speaking with difficulty, then prevented her from learning what is taught to even the most wretched, so her mute resignation was forced on her, but it was also the only way she had found to face up to her life, and what else could she have done, who in her place could have found another way?" (FM, 80). Camus realized "what he wanted most in the world, which was for his mother to read everything that was his life and his being, that was impossible. His love, his only love [his mother], would be forever speechless" (FM, 300). Having a life-long reverence for his mother he acquired a reverence for silence. In a note on their relationship he determined:

"I want to write the story of a pair joined by the same blood and every kind of difference. She similar to the best this world has, and he quietly abominable. He thrown into all the follies of our time, she passing through the same history as if it were that of any time. She silent most of the time, with only a few words at her disposal to express herself; he constantly talking and unable to find in thousands of words what she could say with a single one of her silences...Mother and son" (FM, 310).

Camus learned from his mother that silence is a way of resigning oneself to the inexplicable forces of life while also a mode of communication.

Camus lived not only with the silence of his mother but of others in his family. Admiring the dignity, stoicism, and fortitude conveyed by his mother's silence, Camus attributed these characteristics to the working poor of whom his uncle was representative. Uncle Etienne "was

stone deaf, and he expressed himself as much by onomatopoeic sounds and gestures as with the hundred-odd words at his disposal” (FM, 98). As a child Camus had hoped somehow his uncle could replace his father but this did not happen. The consequence is expressed in *The First Man* where the young protagonist “held a grudge against his uncle, without knowing just what he was blaming him for. But, at the same time, he knew he could not hold him to blame, and that if the poverty, the infirmities, the elemental need in which all his family lived did not excuse everything, in any case they made it impossible to pass judgement on those who were its victims” (FM, 123). Camus understood that daily hardship confronting the family foreclosed its adult members from attaining the insights he himself only achieved later in life.

Even more profound than the silence of his mother and uncle was that of a father killed in World War I before Camus was a year old. He made intense efforts to learn about his father but met with silence from his mother and uncle. When an adult he visited his father’s grave in France but “Around him, in the vast field of the dead, silence reigned” (FM, 25). In a note for *The First Man* he wrote: “O father! I have searched madly for this father whom I never had and here I discovered what I have always had: my mother and her silence (NB1951-1959, p. 83).

Finally there was Camus’ own encounter with a major life setback: his first attack of tuberculosis (TB) when he was seventeen. This was a time, the 1930s, when the life expectancy of people with TB was short; curative drugs were not available until the 1950s. Having to deal with bouts of TB throughout his life, he was always aware of the imminent possibility of the enveloping, unknowable silence of death. In time he would articulate in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (MS) the profoundest silence of all, a silence he characterized as absurd: the confrontation between a person and a silent world whose meaning is unfathomable.

Poverty

Camus' reaction to the poverty of his family was visceral. He shared a small second-floor, three room apartment with his mother, grandmother, uncle, and brother in the poor working class district of Algiers. In one room his mother slept in one bed while Camus and his brother shared another. There was no running water, electricity, or private toilet. He did not grasp the banisters on the stairs to the apartment for fear of touching cockroaches. His visceral response to poverty is revealed by a vivid episode in *The First Man* involving his harsh grandmother who dominated the family. Needing two francs to see a soccer match, which he loved, he did not return all the change to his grandmother from a trip to the grocer he made for her. He told her a two franc note had slipped into the toilet, which was little more than a hole in the floor. She doubted him. He watched in horror when he "saw her roll up her right sleeve, baring her knotty white arm, and go out on the landing. He dashed into the dining room, on the verge of throwing up. When she summoned him, he found her at the washbasin. Her arm was covered with gray soap, which she was rinsing off in a gush of water. 'There was nothing there,' she said. 'You're a liar.'" (FM, 89-90). From this gut-wrenching experience as a child "he understood it was not avarice that caused his grandmother to grope around in the excrement, but the terrible need that made two francs a significant amount in this home" (FM, 90).

Camus feared the poverty that engulfed his family would lead to that "mystery of poverty that creates beings without names and without a past, that sends them into the vast throng of the nameless dead who made the world while they themselves were destroyed forever" (FM, 194). He did not want his family to die sharing the fate of his father. On the death of his father in the war he asked: "What remains of that obscure life? Nothing, an impalpable memory—the light ash of a butterfly wing incinerated in a forest fire" (FM, 314). His father became "forever unknown to his people and his son, he too was returned to that immense oblivion that was the

ultimate homeland of the men of his people,...” (FM, 193-194). Camus strove in his writings to rescue the poor his family represented from the immense oblivion, the “silence of anonymity” (FM, 194).

The mute

In 1995, a posthumously published unfinished autobiographic novel, *The First Man*, translated by David Hapgood, appeared with yet another variation of the term *les muets*. This note is relevant not because it provides yet another translation of *les muets* but because the use of the term provides crucial insight into Camus’ intentions in *Les Muets*. *The First Man* included an appendix of “Notes and Sketches” Camus made in preparing the novel. One note reveals his intent in writing the novel: “Rescue this poor family from the fate of the poor, which is to disappear from history without a trace. *The Speechless Ones*” (FM, 300, my emphasis). The “speechless ones” is “*Les Muets*” in the French edition of the notes (PH, 338). Camus’ note is referring to his own family and thereby identifies the source of the insight he brings to the behaviour of group working men in an Algiers cooperage and through them to *les muets* everywhere. It was Camus’ experience with silence and poverty that drove his need to rescue *les muets* from that “mystery of poverty that creates beings without names and without a past, that sends them into the vast throng of the nameless dead who made the world while they themselves were destroyed forever” (FM, 90).

When Yvars exclaims “Ah, that’s the trouble” he glimpses what Camus found in his family and transformed into the destiny of the workers and their boss in *Les Muets*: “They hurt each other without wanting to, just because each represented to the others the cruel and demanding necessity of their lives” (FM, 123). There is that unbridgeable gap between the workers and the boss who each are attempting in their own way to deal with “the cruel and

demanding necessity of their lives.” Yvars senses some preconscious ambiguous conviction he cannot consciously lucidly express. His brief insight into the mutual misfortune of the boss and the workers “disappeared like a bubble blown and burst at the same time” (TV, 63). When Camus experienced his grandmother groping through excrement for a franc note he was able in time to transform through lucid analysis his visceral repulsion into a profound insight into the behaviour of his family and into the social relationships defined by the necessity of life. Yvars also experienced a visceral moment arising out of the experience surrounding the collapse of Lassalle’s daughter. However, unlike Camus he was incapable of reflecting upon the brief shared misfortunes of life; instead, formed by his own struggles with the unrelenting necessities of life he could only conclude: “Ah, that’s the trouble” (TV, 63). This conviction resides in a realm of silence beyond expression.

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Camus *le mute*

In time Camus would adopt the silence he learned from his family as a mode of communication. In the early 1950s, the time he was writing the short stories that became *Exile and the Kingdom* Camus adopted silence as a position in the bitter armed conflict between the

Algerians fighting for independence and the French government attempting to hang onto its colony. He embraced this silence as a result of the failure of his personal intervention to promote a dialogue between two irreconcilable opponents in the war. He declared “I have decided to stop participating in the endless polemics whose only effect has been to make the contending factions in Algeria even more intransigent and to deepen the divisions in a France already poisoned by hatred and factionalism” (AC, 24). He determined that silence was the only constructive response he could make to the crisis thereby becoming himself one of *les muets*.

When in Stockholm in 1957 to accept his Noble Prize in Literature Camus gave a lecture to an audience of university students. A Muslim student asked Camus why he had not spoken out on the war in Algeria. Camus responded that he concluded any further efforts on his part to intervene in Algeria would only risk exacerbating the violence. Taunted by the student Camus pointed out he had always spoken out against terrorist violence. He condemned in particular the violence of both sides in the streets of Algiers that could strike his mother and family, whom he declared he would defend before having to take sides in any cause. So in his silence Camus rejoined *les muets* of his family. He broke the silence once. As the struggle intensified in Algeria Camus assembled a collection of his writings on Algeria done from 1939 to 1958. He concluded in the last essay, “The New Algeria,” that “This is the last warning that can be given by a writer who for the past 20 years has been dedicated to the Algerian cause, before he lapses once again into silence” (AC, 184). He died two years later in an auto accident, silenced for good, loyal to *les muets*.

Conclusion

For Camus the personal and the political in life are fused. It is this experiential intertwining that gives his stories their moral force. While his stories arose out of challenges in his time they resonate with contemporary political and social challenges of our own time. As the pace of economic globalization and technological change that confronted Yvars and his co-workers accelerates, today millions of *les muets* throughout the world remain with us. Experts and pundits inform them that their situation is just the way things are; as Lassalle told the workers: take it or leave it. Keep silent. *Les Muets* is Camus's attempt to save all of *les muets* struggling with "the cruel and demanding necessity of their lives" from having to enter "that immense oblivion that was the ultimate homeland of the men of his people" (FM, 194). In his family Camus learned the necessity of life, poverty, and unrelenting work can drive people to a silent resignation. Camus rescues *les muets* from oblivion. He gives them voice and in doing so makes their cause ours as well.

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